TL469

AMIGOS DA TERRA

ASSOCIAÇÃO PORTUGUESA DE ECOLOGISTAS

1. INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time there was this vast forest in East Timor.

Before Man came Tropical Rainforests must have spread all over covering both mountains and coastal areas.specially in the south east part of the territory where the tropical climate provides more permanent rain.

As to Man, all he ever did was to destroy his "evergreen world".

Today,except for a few spots, Tropical Rainforests disappeared.They can still be found in less accessible or of difficult cultivation areas,in the most thinly populated regions ,on isolated hill tops and in ravines.

Here are some statements of authors that some time ago dedicated themselves to the study of Timor's forests.

"From one side to another,Timor must have been ,not very long ago,an endless forest in perfect harmony with its environmental conditions."

"Timor is,first of all,an alive forest problem."

"The soils of Timor",in Memórias da Junta de
Investigações Cientificas do
Ultramar,nr 64
Lisbon,1978

"If Man s interfering influence were absente,these forests would give way,in the long run.to the primary,evergreen.mountain rainforest."

"The Timor Problem - A Geographical Interpretation of an Underdeveloped Island".
by Dr.F.J. Ormeling 1957

2. MAN INTERFERING ON EAST TIMOR'S RAINFORESTS

Man always thought it was easier and economical just to cut or burn the forest to plant his own food crops.In this way,Timorese indigenous peoples,althought having a great knowledge of their environmental products,adopted the shifting agricultural system and have always used fire to set up farming lands.

"Thus the Timorese possesses the same amazing knowledge of the flora of his habitat ,which generally characterizes food gatherers.He uses leaves,shoots,berries,fruits,seeds,flowers,roots,tubers,bark and pith in surprisingly varying ways.From the surrounding vegetation he procures his medicines..."

"Besides this he is very familiar with the properties of the timber surrounding him.He knows exactly which to use for the various accessories for house building."

F.J Ormeling,idem

The continuous and regular destruction of the forest for the practice of agriculture,cattle raising and also for timber trade changed what is called the primary forest into secondary forest. This one is composed of different species resulting in the disappearing of some of them.

A study from 1978 tells us that the primary forest ,or rainforest,already only occupied by then 1% of East Timor's territory.

The secondary forest that appears is later replaced by new burning or soil erosion,giving pace to savannas.In 1978 it was calculated that secondary forests occupied 97% of the total area.Whereas another study from the thirties refers the existance of an almost unreachable forest in the very east side of East Timor full of great productive species of timber,thus showing that forest covered a big area.

This secondary forest is later on replaced by grasslands: "Although locally on Timor natural grasslands most probably ocurred before Man disturbed the balance of nature,the extensive grass tracts,existing today,are attributed to regular cultural burnings.Regions once covered with grass tend to remain open for indefinite periods chiefly because they are burnt repeatedly." idem

Timor forest was sistematically destroyed as time went by.This disastrous burning resulted in the lack of timber and in the exhaustion of forests.Already in the thirties, the absence of a well planned,sustainable forest policy was felt .It was also felt that the forest natural products could mean a significant income for the populations,as well as reforestation was urgent.

Timber trade increased during the Portuguese occupation of East Timor.Amoung several valuable species,the case of "sandal"is meaningful as it illustrates the complete disregard,and consequently,the disappearing of natural resources due to careless timber trade.

The awareness of this situation led the Portuguese Governement to establish legislation,the so-called "Regulamento Florestal" in 1912.It aimed at protecting East Timor's forests and at setting up specific plans for exploitation ,namely, reforestation,and also the establishment of some specific areas of forest to be exploited.

But the lack of technical guidance continued to destroy forests.As F.J Ormeling refers "The shortage of construction wood was particularly felt after the Second World War,when imported timber had to be used..."

The invasion of East Timor by Indonesia continued and worsened this situation.The Indonesian Government not only practices the most dictatorial policy towards East Timor submitting its people and its culture to all kinds of repression and torture but also keeps on destroying the lasting forests.

Indonesian forest destruction serves both economic and political purposes.Burning is used so that Indonesian soldiers have a better controle of people,specially of the rebels which for years have been hidding in the mountains.Wherever there are military posts the cutting of the vegetation is sistematic.This wood is,afterwards traded.

Some areas of forest destruction can be stated(*):

- Natarbora(plain in the south coast between the rivers Dielors and Sahé): Timorese people are forced to leave their homes in the mountains,where it is healthier to live,and are sent to the plains to be kept under contole;

-Kirás,in the plain of Satu Berlin, in the south coast;

-Maliana,plain of Bibi Tunum,non-habited area,farming land.

As to sandal it has been almost completely destroyed.For example,Indonesia built a sandal perfume factory 4 km from Dili at the heap Fatu Ahi.But in a few time it had to be closed because there was no more sandal to keep it working.All the trees,small and big were cut down.

*stated by Timorese people living in Portugal.

3. CAUSES AND RESULTS OF FOREST DESTRUCTION

Population pressure,cattle raising,shifting agriculture,timber trade lead to soil exhaustion within a "vicious cycle".

After burnings the farmer plants his own food crops such as beans,rice,potatoes,a.s.o.However,this fertile period does not last for a long time.Soils under a tropical climate lose their fertility and erosion spreads replacing good farming land due to the lack of vegetation.

With the repeated burnings,the soil is laid bare to transporting effects of wind and rain.Productive capacity and crop yields decrease with the destruction of organicmatter and humus.Harvests become scarce for the population demands.

On the other hand,cattle raising leads to "intensification of the practice of burning grasslands,overgrazing,to increasing damage on tree growth,elimination of grass varieties,speeding up of erosion,affecting of forest lands."

idem

Soil erosion provoques shortage of water supply:soils are drier due to the destruction of the absorbent soil cover.Short periods of floods alternating with long periods of very low water dryness have happened.

Population increase also gives its contribution to forest destruction.When the indigenous farmer can no longer cultivate his lands,as they become eroded, he must migrate from the more exhausted lands.This shift is only a temporary relief as population pressure increases once more and the cycle of forest destruction starts all over again.Burnings return in order to obtain land for food production.And later on more land becomes eroded.Similar destruction occurs as the herds increase.More land is lost to erosion leading to destruction on both nature and culture.

As in other places,forest destruction reflects,in a great measure,the problems of developing areas:"malnutrition,illiteracy,primitive agricultural methods and low crop yields."

idem

4. ACTIONS

The most important action to carry out in this case study is public awareness raising.People have never heard of East Timor forest and political problems.In fact,this would be a unique opportunity to show forest destruction and,at the same time,to stress human rights violations towards the hypocrisy and indifference played by the International Community.As always,human rights violations give pace to countries economic and political interests.

If it were possible,Timorese people should also be warned of their agricultural system harmful effects.This information action will be pretty difficult as they seem to be isolated from the rest of world.Advice and guidance should be spread in order to improve agricultural methods and production demands.

Also important is the pressure to stop timber trade carried out under non-sustainable management.In this way,a card campaign should be set up and directed to several targets,specially to Indonesia and to importer countries and companies.

Letters/card campaign towards the Indonesian Government: stop trade of Timorese timber; demand for reforestation.

Letters/card campaign towards countries and companies which import timber: stop buying Timorese tropical timber;give advice for the use of alternative timbers.